

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE  
NASHVILLE DIVISION**

**LEONARD ELLIS,**

**Plaintiff,**

**v.**

**F/N/U HARRELL**

**Defendant.**

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**Civil Action No. 3:24-cv-351  
Judge Richardson/Frensley**

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Pending before the Court is the Defendants' Motion for Sanctions and Dismissal with Prejudice (Docket No. 19). The Plaintiff had not responded to the motion, so the undersigned issued a show cause order giving the Plaintiff until December 13, 2024, to respond to the motion to dismiss or to show cause why this action should not be dismissed for lack of prosecution. Docket No. 20. For the reasons set forth herein, the undersigned recommends that this matter be **DISMISSED WITHOUT PREJUDICE** and that the Defendant's Motion for Sanctions and Dismissal with Prejudice (Docket No. 19) be **DENIED AS MOOT**.

**BACKGROUND**

This action was filed in the United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee on March 28, 2024. Docket No. 1. An Amended Complaint was filed in this matter on April 30, 2024. Docket No. 7. The Court allowed Plaintiff's claim for excessive force against Defendant Harrell on Initial Review and the claims against all other Defendants were dismissed. Docket No. 9. The Court entered a scheduling order on October 2, 2024. Docket No. 16. The Parties were advised to "keep both the Court and the opposing parties or their counsel informed of their current address." *Id.* The order further provided that a party's failure to keep the Court

informed of his current address may result in a recommendation that his action be dismissed for failure to prosecute and for failure to comply with the Court's order. *Id.*

In his motion to dismiss, the Defendant contends that the Plaintiff's failure to update his current address and failure to comply with the Court's order and Local Rules of Court indicate the Plaintiff has no desire to prosecute this matter. Docket No. 19. They further argue that dismissal for failure to prosecute this action is an appropriate remedy under the circumstances of this case. *Id.*

The Defendant filed the instant motion to dismiss on November 4, 2024. Docket No. 19. Under Local Rule 7.01 (a)(3) and the scheduling order in this matter (Docket No. 16) the Plaintiff's response to the motion to dismiss was due by November 18, 2024. After the Plaintiff failed to respond to the motion, the Court entered an Order on November 27, 2024, for the Plaintiff to show cause by December 13, 2024, why his claims should not be dismissed for failure to prosecute. Docket No. 20. Plaintiff was again forewarned that his failure to respond to the Court's Order may lead to a recommendation that his claims be dismissed. *Id.* Plaintiff has not responded to the motion to dismiss or the Court's show cause order. Further, the copy of the Court's Order mailed to Plaintiff at his previously provided address was returned as "Unable to Forward" Docket No. 18. The Court has received no communication from the Plaintiff since he provided his address on May 21, 2024. It appears that he has likewise not maintained contact with counsel for the Defendant. Docket No. 19-2.

## **LAW AND ANALYSIS**

### **A. Legal Standard**

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b) "confers on district courts the authority to dismiss an action for failure of a Plaintiff to prosecute the claim or comply with the Rules or any order of

the Court. *Schafer v. City of Defiance Police Department*, 529 F. 3d 731, 736 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2008)(citing *Knoll v. AT & T*, 176 F. 3d 359, 362-3 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1999)); *Carpenter v. City of Flint*, 723 F. 3d 700, 704 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2013)(“It is well settled that a district court has the authority to dismiss *sua sponte* a lawsuit for failure to prosecute.”). Similarly, this Court’s Local Rules provides that “[c]ivil suits that have been pending for an unreasonable period of time without any action having been taken by any party may be summarily dismissed . . . without prejudice to refile or to move the Court to set aside the order of dismissal for just cause.” Local Rule 41.01(a)(dismissal for unreasonable delay. Dismissal for failure to prosecute is a tool for district courts to manage their dockets and avoid unnecessary burdens on opposing parties and the judiciary. *See Schafer*, 529 F. 3d at 736 (quoting *Knoll*, 176 F. 3d at 363).

The Court considers four factors in determining whether dismissal under Rule 41(b) is appropriate: (1) the willfulness, bad faith, or fault of the plaintiff; (2) whether the opposing party has been prejudiced by the plaintiff’s conduct; (3) whether the plaintiff was warned that failure to cooperate could lead to dismissal; and (4) the availability and appropriateness of other, less drastic sanctions. *Schafer v. City of Defiance Police Dep’t*, 529 F. 3d 731, 737 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2008). A dismissal for failure to prosecute under Rule 41(b) constitutes an adjudication on the merits unless the dismissal order states otherwise. Fed. R. Civ. P. 41(b). The Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit has noted, however, that dismissal under Rule 41(b) is a “harsh sanction” and should only apply in extreme situations where there is a “clear record of delay or contumacious conduct by the plaintiff.” *Carter*, 636 F. 2d at 161, quoting *Silas v. Sears, Roebuck & Co., Inc.*, 586 F. 2d 382, 385 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1978).

Rule 41(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure authorizes the involuntary dismissal of an action if a Plaintiff fails to prosecute or to comply with an order of the Court. *See, Jourdan v.*

*Jabe*, 951 F. 2d 108, 109 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir., 1991). “[W]hile pro se litigants may be granted some latitude when dealing with sophisticated legal issues, acknowledging their lack of formal training, there is no cause for extending this margin to straightforward procedural requirements that a lay person can comprehend as easily as a lawyer.” *Id.* “[T]he lenient treatment of pro se litigants has limits.” *Pilgrim v. Littlefield*, 92 F. 3d 413, 416 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1996).

When a pro se litigant fails to comply with an easily understood court-imposed deadline, there is no basis for treating that party more favorably than a party who is represented. *Id.* Additionally, Courts have an inherent power “acting on their own initiative, to clear their calendars of cases that have remained dormant because of inaction or dilatoriness of the party seeking relief.” *Link v. Wabash Railroad Co.*, 370 U. S. 626, 630 (1962).

This is not a case of a plaintiff simply filing documents past deadlines or filing inadequate briefs. *See Mulbah v. Detroit Bd. of Educ.*, 261 F. 3d 586, 593-94 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2001) (finding that the district court abused its discretion by granting a motion to dismiss for failure to prosecute). Giving due consideration to each of the factors, the Court finds that dismissal for failure to prosecute is an appropriate and necessary sanction, as no alternative sanction “would protect the integrity of pre-trial procedures.” *Carter v. City of Memphis*, 636 F. 2d 159, 161 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1980).

## **B. The Case at Bar**

The undersigned finds that dismissal under Rule 41(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure is appropriate because the four relevant factors, considered under the “relaxed” standard for dismissal without prejudice show a record of delay, refusal to advance the case and failure to comply with the Court’s orders by the Plaintiff.

### **1. Bad Faith, Willfulness, or Fault**

A plaintiff’s actions demonstrate bad faith, willfulness, or fault where they “display either

an intent to thwart judicial proceedings or a reckless disregard for the effect of [plaintiff's] conduct on those proceedings.” *Wu v. T.W. Wang, Inc.*, 420 F. 3d 641, 643 (6th Cir. 2005) (quoting *Mulbah*, 261 F. 3d at 591(6<sup>th</sup> Cir 2001)). Although there is no indication that the Plaintiffs’ failure to file a response to the defendants’ motion to dismiss by the deadline was driven by bad faith, he is still “at fault for failing to comply with the Court’s Order[.]” *Malott v. Haas*, 2017 WL 1319839, at \*2 (E.D. Mich. Feb. 8, 2017), report and recommendation adopted by 2017 WL 1244991 (E.D. Mich. Apr. 5, 2017); *see id.* (finding that first factor weighed in favor of dismissal where plaintiff had failed to respond to the defendants’ summary judgment motion, despite receiving additional time to do so, and had failed to respond to the court’s show-cause orders). This factor weighs in favor of dismissal.

## **2. Prejudice**

The Sixth Circuit has held that “[a] defendant is prejudiced by a plaintiff’s dilatory conduct if the defendant is ‘required to waste time, money, and effort in pursuit of cooperation which [the plaintiff] was legally obligated to provide.’” *Carpenter*, 723 F. 3d at 707 (second alteration in original) (quoting *Harmon v. CSX Transp., Inc.*, 110 F. 3d 364, 368 (6th Cir. 1997)); *see also Schafer*, 529 F. 3d at 739 (same). Such prejudice typically arises in the discovery context. *See, e.g., Harmon*, 110 F. 3d at 368 (finding prejudice where plaintiff failed to respond to defendant’s interrogatories and a related motion to compel); *Wright v. City of Germantown*, 2013 WL 1729105, at \*2 (W. D. Tenn. Apr. 22, 2013) (finding prejudice where defendant “expended time and money pursuing [plaintiff’s] required initial disclosures and deposition testimony”). Notably, time and effort spent on “typical steps in the early stages of litigation[.]” such as answering a complaint or filing pretrial motions to advance the defendant’s position, are not actions “necessitated by any lack of cooperation” and therefore do not weigh in favor of dismissal for failure to prosecute.

*Schafer*, 529 F. 3d at 739. The Sixth Circuit explained in *Schafer v. City of Defiance Police Department* that “[i]f such efforts . . . [were] alone sufficient to establish prejudice,” for the purpose of Rule 41(b), “then every defendant who answers a complaint and responds minimally to a lawsuit would be able to claim prejudice[,]” a “result [that] would defy common sense.” 529 F. 3d at 740.

Here, the defendant filed a motion to dismiss (Docket No. 19 ). The Plaintiff’s failure to take any steps to advance the litigation does prejudice the Defendant. All parties are entitled to a just and prompt resolution of their cases. The failure to advance litigation, as the Plaintiff has here, prejudices the parties and reflects the type of situation where the Court should intervene. The failure of a party to respond to dispositive motions deprives the Court of that party’s opposition, reflects a lack of interest in the litigation and forces the Court to address matters without the benefit of the nonmoving party’s advocacy. Thus, this factor weighs in favor of dismissal.

### **3. Prior Notice**

Whether a party was warned that failure to cooperate could lead to dismissal “is a ‘key consideration’” in the Rule 41(b) analysis. *Schafer*, 529 F. 3d at 740 (*quoting Stough*, 138 F. 3d at 615). In the Court’s scheduling order, the Parties were explicitly ordered to comply with the Local Rules that they were to keep both Court and opposing counsel informed of their current address. Docket No. 14. The Order likewise warned the Parties that a failure to do so may result in a recommendation that the action may be dismissed for failure to prosecute or for failure to comply with the Court’s Order. The Plaintiff did not respond to the Motion to Dismiss in the time required by the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure and the Local Rules of Court. Thereafter, the Court entered a show cause order further extending Plaintiff’s deadline to December 13, 2024, to indicate why his claim should not be dismissed for failure to prosecute. Docket No. 20. The Show Cause Order further warned the Plaintiff that his failure to respond to the Order may lead to a recommendation

that his claims be dismissed. *Id.* The Plaintiff has not responded to the Motion to Dismiss nor this Court's Show Cause Order. This factor weighs in favor of dismissal.

#### **4. Appropriateness of Other Sanctions**

The less-drastic sanction of dismissal without prejudice is available and appropriate here. Dismissal without prejudice balances the Court's interest in "sound judicial case and docket management" with "the public policy interest in the disposition of cases on their merits." *Muncy*, 110 F. App'x at 557 n. 5; see also *Mulbah*, 261 F. 3d at 590–91. That is so even though the defendants have filed a motion to dismiss. See *Watsy v. Richards*, No. 86-1856, 1987 WL 37151, at \*1 (6th Cir. Apr. 20, 1987) (affirming dismissal of action for failure to prosecute where plaintiff had not provided the court with a current mailing address or responded to the defendants' motion dismiss despite a sixty-day extension); *Thomas-Wilson v. Green Tree Servicing LLC*, No. 3:14-cv-01968, 2016 WL 4775738, at \*1 (M.D. Tenn. Jan. 15, 2016) (dismissing pro se plaintiff's claims without prejudice for failure to prosecute and finding defendants' pending motion for summary judgment moot). Such a sanction is particularly appropriate in cases of prolonged inactivity and where, as here, the plaintiff appears pro se. See *Schafer*, 529 F. 3d at 737 (noting that courts apply the four-factor test "more stringently in cases where the plaintiff's attorney's conduct is responsible for the dismissal." *Id.* (quoting *Harmon*, 110 F. 3d at 367)).

All four factors set forth above weigh in favor of dismissal of this case. While dismissal under Rule 41(b) is a "harsh" sanction. Plaintiff has been given every opportunity to participate in this litigation and has chosen not to do so. The Plaintiff has been given ample opportunity to cure the defects and specifically advised that his failure to cooperate and comply with the Court's orders could lead to dismissal. No further less drastic sanction would be appropriate in this case.

For the foregoing reasons, the undersigned **RECOMMENDS** that this matter be

**DISMISSED WITHOUT PREJUDICE** under Rule 41(b) for failure to prosecute and for failure to comply with the Court's orders. The undersigned also **RECOMMENDS** that the Defendant's Motion for Sanctions and Dismissal with Prejudice (Docket No. 19) be **DENIED AS MOOT**.

Under Rule 72(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, any party has fourteen (14) days from receipt of this Report and Recommendation in which to file any written objections to this Recommendation with the District Court. Any party opposing said objections shall have fourteen (14) days from receipt of any objections filed in this Report in which to file any response to said objections. Failure to file specific objections within fourteen (14) days of receipt of this Report and Recommendation can constitute a waiver of further appeal of this Recommendation. *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140, 106 S. Ct. 466, 88 L. Ed. 2d 435 (1985), *reh'g denied*, 474 U.S. 1111 (1986).



**JEFFERY S. FRENSLEY**  
United States Magistrate Judge